

Book Review

Iain H. Murray, *John MacArthur, Servant of the Word and Flock* (Banner of Truth, 2011): 246 pp.

The fact that the staunchly reformed publisher Banner of Truth has released a biography of dispensational pastor John MacArthur is testimony to the fact that MacArthur is one of the most influential evangelical ministers of our times. This book began in 2009 as a biographical portrait commissioned by the elders of Grace Community Church to mark MacArthur's fortieth anniversary of ministry in that congregation. Murray has expanded that profile but concludes by noting that this is "little more than a sketch; this is not the time, nor I the writer to give a full portrait" (p. 229).

What do we learn about the life of John MacArthur? Murray begins by describing his early years growing up in a minister's home in Southern California. As a young man he attended fundamentalist mecca Bob Jones University and preached his first feeble sermon in a Spartanburg, South Carolina bus station. Uncomfortable with Bob Jones, MacArthur eventually transferred to Pacific College and then on to Talbot Seminary, where he came under the influence of Charles L. Feinberg. This transition reflected MacArthur's discomfort with the "war psychology" of classical fundamentalism and his move toward more mainstream evangelicalism.

MacArthur became pastor of Grace Community Church in 1969 at the age of twenty-nine. Murray notes the providential placement of MacArthur in this then 450 member congregation, strategically located in an area of Los Angeles that was exploding with growth. The church grew in number, however, not by the implementation of pragmatic church growth methods but through MacArthur's commitment to expositional preaching. With growth there also came challenges which MacArthur encountered in his ministry. This included a painful rebellion by his staff ("Black Tuesday") and a 1980 lawsuit brought against MacArthur charging "clergy malpractice" after the suicide of a church member.

Murray also traces MacArthur's gradual movement toward Calvinism that came through his exposure to the Puritans and his study of the Bible. Murray does not, however, pinpoint any pivotal turning point in particular when MacArthur decisively embraced the doctrines of grace. He notes that MacArthur, like Lloyd-Jones "does not wave the labels 'Calvinistic' or 'Reformed.'" (p. 206). MacArthur's theological shift led to his critique of pragmatic easy-believism and to eventual conflict with his fellow dispensationalist over "Lordship salvation" in the 1980s. Murray describes the expansion of MacArthur's ministry through the publishing of books primarily based on his preaching and through the "Grace to You" broadcast ministry that began with church volunteers distributing cassette tapes. Of special note is the way in which the providential addition of Phil Johnson to MacArthur's staff assisted and accelerated these expansions. In addition, Murray traces Grace Community's acquisition of Los Angeles Bible

College and its transformation to the Master's College in 1985, with the addition of the Master's Seminary in 1986. MacArthur is indeed something of a modern day Spurgeon whose local church ministry has flourished in multiple areas including public preaching, print, and education. After surveying MacArthur's labors at Grace Community, Murray observes, "There is a likeness to the work of C. H. Spurgeon, who died in 1892, that cannot be missed" (p. 225).

Though this biography is overwhelmingly approving of and complimentary toward MacArthur, Murray is unafraid to raise some concerns and cautions (see especially "Objections and Questions" pp. 183-196). Most notable here is the subject of MacArthur's dispensationalism. MacArthur has been criticized by his fellow dispensationalists, most notably in the "Lordship salvation" debate. Murray adds: "But criticism has also come from Reformed Christians, who while admiring his ministry as a whole, regard his thinking as defective on this subject" (p. 192). MacArthur's deep seated dispensational convictions sometimes lead him into contradiction. For example, he upheld the moral law against antinomianism in the "Lordship salvation" debate but does not promote the abiding validity of the fourth commandment (cf. pp. 115, n. 5; 123; and the notes from the MacArthur Study Bible on Exodus 20:8-11). Murray also takes issue with MacArthur regarding the Regulative Principle in worship and the use of multiple musical instruments, in particular (see pp. 189-191).

Though clear in raising questions about MacArthur's inconsistencies regarding reformed theology, Murray also expresses admiration for MacArthur's discerning insight in evaluating doctrinal and pragmatic fads that arise in evangelicalism. Murray approvingly draws attention, in particular, to MacArthur's critique of the current revival of interest in Calvinism among the "young, restless, and reformed" (see pp. 207-212). Murray notes, "I can think of reasons for that concern. For one thing, it is premature to be confident the advance will continue" (p. 209). He adds, "In the current recovery of Calvinistic thinking, there is need for greater fear of God, of His majesty and holiness" (p. 211).

As Murray himself admits, this biography is, in many ways, little more than a sketch. One thing it seems to be lacking is a personal feel of warmth and intimacy toward the subject. Murray does provide a chapter on MacArthur's wife Patricia (pp. 129-142), including her involvement in and recovery from a life threatening automobile accident. He also provides a closing chapter of "The Man" (pp. 229-240) stressing MacArthur's diligence, curiosity, and calmness. Little else shines through, however, about MacArthur's family and social relationships or his interior life. Still, it is valuable to have such a survey of MacArthur, especially one written during his lifetime. Certainly such a book is always especially useful to men in the ministry as they prayerfully consider their own labors in the Lord's vineyard.

Jeffrey T. Riddle, Christ Reformed Baptist Church, Charlottesville, Virginia